

Shame

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Shame gets a bad press. It is as though we shouldn't feel it at all. All shame is bad. It may come as a surprise then that the Buddha calls shame a guardian of society and it is coupled with guilt or fear of consequences. Shame or its lesser form embarrassment is what we feel when we have let ourselves down and especially when we have let ourselves down in other people's eyes. There is the delightful tale of Sir Walter Raleigh who, presumably as he bowed to the Queen Elizabeth, let out a great fart. He did not reappear at court for year or so. When he did arrive the Queen greeted him warmly and told him, 'We have forgot the fart.' We are often more ashamed by social gaffes than by immoral behaviour. And I dare say if we get away with it, we have none at all. Are we ashamed when we slander someone, no matter how slight? Or take the pen home from the office? Or exaggerate to the point of untruthfulness? There is a level of shame that can be too delicate. An over-sensitive conscience. If a small gaffe of calling someone by the wrong name keeps you up at night; if we find ourselves avoiding society because of the way we look; if we freeze when we stand up in public (shyness often masquerades for shame); then we may benefit from counselling. There is also the exercise of being aware of the feeling. Recognise it as unwholesome and wait for it to pass or do what you have to do anyway. This is vipassana in action. In the Buddhadhamma, shame is always seen as an unwholesome state for it arises when we do or think something that belittles us. And yet without it and its companion of the guilty fear of consequences what would stop any of us from committing crimes? It is the desire not to suffer shame and its companion, guilt that is wholesome. So the task is to reflect on any thought, speech or action which we see is unethical, harmful or simply insensitive and to acknowledge what shame or lack of it came up. If we feel the shame, then we can reflect on the harm done to see if it is appropriate. We can talk to the person whom we imagine no longer respects us or holds us with the same regard, and correct or soften their view of us. If we acknowledge that what we have just done is wrong, insensitive, inappropriate and there is no shame to it, then again we need to reflect as to why that is? Don't we care how people view us? What sort of self-respecting standards are we keeping if we couldn't care less if we break them? This is all to do with refining our moral conscience. It is about how we relate. The way we relate manifests our wisdom or lack of it.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.